

If you celebrate Christmas at all, you're almost certainly familiar with traditional carols of the English-speaking world such as "Silent Night" and "Joy to the World." While many of those carols have been translated into Spanish and some have become popular, the Spanish-speaking world also has its share of traditional carols, most of which are all but unknown outside Spain and Latin America.

Among the most popular Spanish carols is *Los peces en el río*, which draws a contrast between the fishes in the river, who are excited about the birth of the baby Jesus, and the Virgin Mary, who goes about doing the chores of daily life. You'll find the song in most written and recorded collections of Spanish-language Christmas tunes.

The writer of the song is unknown, although the tune shows some Arabic influence.

The carol exists in a number of variations. Some include several more verses than the ones listed below, and some of them vary slightly in the words used. Lyrics of one popular version are shown below along with a fairly literal English translation. Note that, as is often the case in poetry and song lyrics, some of the norms of grammar and word order are applied loosely.

Los peces en el río

La Virgen se está _____
entre _____ y cortina.
Los _____ son de oro
y el peine de _____ fina.

ESTRIBILLO:

Pero mira como _____
los _____ en el río.
Pero mira como beben
_____ a Dios nacido.
Beben y beben
y _____ a beber.
Los peces en el río
por ver a Dios nacer.

La Virgen _____ pañales
y los tiende en el romero,
los _____ cantando,
y el romero floreciendo.

ESTRIBILLO

La Virgen se está lavando
con un poco de _____.
Se le han picado las manos,
manos de mi _____.

ESTRIBILLO

Peinando	peces	lava
Pajarillos	jabón	corazón
por ver	beben	cabellos
vuelven	cortina	plata

English translation

The Fishes in the River

The Virgin is combing her hair
between the curtains.
Her hairs are of gold
and the comb of fine silver.

CHORUS:

But look at how the fishes
in the river drink.
But look how they drink
in order to see God born.
They drink and they drink
and they return to drink,
the fishes in the river,
to see God being born.

The Virgin washes diapers
and hangs them on the rosemary,
the birdies singing
and the rosemary flowering.

CHORUS

The virgin is washing herself
with a little bit of soap.
Her hands have been irritated,
the hands of my heart.

CHORUS

Obviously, this song, like many, loses much of its impact in direct translation. Therefore, you may be interested in reading, on the following page, a singable interpretation of this song in English.

ESTRIBILLO

English interpretation

The Fishes in the River

The Virgin Mary combs her precious hair
as she gives thanks for her baby.
Even she cannot understand why
God chose her to be a mother.

CHORUS:

But fishes in the river,
they are so delighted.
The fishes in the river,
to see the birth of God.
See how they swim and swim
and then they swim some more.
The fishes in the river,
to see the Savior born.

The Virgin Mary washes swaddling clothes
and hangs them on the rose bush
While birds of the air sing in praise
and the roses begin their blooming.

CHORUS

The Virgin Mary washes precious hands,
hands to take care of the baby
How I'm in awe of those busy, busy hands,
hands to take care of my Savior.

CHORUS